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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001837

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/08/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL POLITICS: AKP CONSOLIDATES CONTROL

REF: A. ISTANBUL 448

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1847

Classified By: Consul-General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (sbu) Summary: Following dominating victories in the March 28 local elections, Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials in Istanbul have sought to further consolidate power by attracting converts from their parties and have transferred key assets from the few remaining non-AKP districts to areas under their control. The adversely affected mayors, who also complain that the AKP-controlled greater municipality routinely discriminates against them in allocating investment for municipal projects, have challenged some of the new measures in court. Although tense relations between the city and these districts will make life difficult for the handful of non-AKP mayors, most enjoy strong political and economic support from their relatively wealthy and educated constituents. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (sbu) The Justice and Development Party (AKP) racked up an impressive list of victories in the March 28 local elections in Istanbul, taking approximately 45 percent of the total vote, winning the Istanbul mayorship, 69 percent of the seats on the Istanbul city council, and 24 of Istanbul's 32 district mayorships. The rare holdouts were Istanbul's wealthiest districts (Bakirkoy, Besiktas, Sisli, Kadikoy, and Avcilar), where majorities of the better educated and more secular populations elected Republican People's Party (CHP) mayors, while popular incumbent Motherland Party (ANAP) mayors managed to hold on in the Prince's Islands and Buyukcekmece (both relatively affluent summer resort areas, although Buyukcekmece now borders Istanbul's urban sprawl), as well as Catalca (rural, agriculture-intensive). Since the elections, however, the ANAP district mayors for both the Prince's Islands and Catalca have abandoned their party and joined AKP. (Note: The chairman of the CHP city council group, who was at the iftar dinner attended by PM Erdogan and hosted by Istanbul Mayor Topbas where one of the mayors publicly switched parties, remarked to poloff that he thought it insulting and inappropriate to conduct this ceremony in the presence of local CHP and ANAP officials. End Note).

[1](#)3. (sbu) Local mayors have complained to poloff that the AKP-controlled Istanbul city council has taken steps to consolidate the party's power at the expense of local mayors from other parties. In Bakirkoy, the Istanbul city council has long eyed the profitable Hippodrome, or race track. Years earlier, measures were passed to ensure that taxes from off-track betting (there are hundreds of venues around the city) remain in the district where the bets are placed. This year the city council passed a new measure expropriating 80 percent of the race track's monthly USD 2 million on-site taxes to be distributed to other districts and the greater municipality. With the Hippodrome accounting for 35 percent of Bakirkoy's total revenue, Unal Erzen, the CHP Bakirkoy district mayor, worries that he may have trouble making ends meet. AKP Istanbul Chairman Mehmet Muezzinoglu told poloff that the Hippodrome belongs to all of Istanbul and that the city council would have followed through with these plans even if they also controlled Bakirkoy. Erzen also complained that Bakirkoy is routinely overlooked by the Greater Municipality when it comes to large investments in transportation and infrastructure. (Note: As one of the wealthier districts in Istanbul, Bakirkoy has enjoyed major investments in past years and faces few of the endemic problems of other, poorer districts. End Note).

[1](#)4. (sbu) ANAP Buyukcekmece district mayor Hasan Akgun had similar complaints. A significant portion of this district's revenue comes from taxes paid by businesses in the district's industrial area, one of the largest in Istanbul. Several weeks ago, AKP used its majority in the Istanbul city council to separate the Buyukcekmece industrial area from that district and attach it instead to a neighboring region controlled by an AKP official. Akgun has challenged the measure in court and trials are ongoing. AKP Istanbul Chairman Muezzinoglu conceded that Akgun is "10 percent right" in his claims, but argued that the redistricting was part of a much larger effort to redraw local borders in a more rational manner. Asked whether Buyukcekmece continues to get a fair share of investment from the Istanbul Greater Municipality for public works projects, Akgun claimed that he has gotten "nothing." CHP Besiktas district mayor Ismail Unal, meanwhile, told poloff that relations with Istanbul

Mayor Topbas are pleasant "face-to-face," but that they get no real cooperation or follow-up outside of these meetings.

15. (c) Comment: While AKP has clearly used its dominating position in the Istanbul city council to consolidate its control in Istanbul, it is unclear whether this is anything more than "politics as usual." We have also heard many (unconfirmed) rumors about local corruption going all the way to the highest levels in the AKP in Istanbul. Some early assessments of Istanbul Mayor Kadir Topbas suggest that he is relatively ineffective; many of our contacts have suggested that real power lies instead with Vice Mayor Idris Gulluce and AKP Istanbul Chairman Muezzinoglu. In the end, whether or not AKP is guilty of corruption or dirty politics, they will enjoy their dominating position in local politics for several years, but if they fail to deliver on people's expectations there will be nobody else to blame when voters go back to the polls in 2009.

ARNETT